



The World's Greatest Attack Pilot

By Stephen Coonts

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When I was last published in *Approach*, it was as an anonymous (thank God!) nugget explaining to the world how one goes about landing at the wrong airport. The wrong airport was Fallon Municipal. It turned out I was one of three fools who had done the same thing, though at three different places, and our written confessions with names changed to protect the guilty were published in one article. My skipper told the CAG that a lesser pilot than Coonts would have killed himself landing at Fallon Muni at night, but the CAG shot back that a better pilot wouldn't have landed there at all. I did get a good lesson out of it though, and

I'm still alive after 2,000 hours in jets, none of which I ever bent up.

"Sam, what do you think of all these accidents lately?" Jake Grafton was lying on his bunk flipping through *Approach*. "We were doing real well on the accident rate, then all at once there's a rash of crashes."

Sammy Lundeen leaned back in his desk chair and dolefully regarded his roommate. "All the nonhackers are paying the price. They just don't have the 'pure, righteous stuff,' like I do."

"Cut me some slack. I'm serious."



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Lundeen tilted his chair precariously and propped his feet on his desk. "OK; my humble J.O. opinion. Anyone can have an accident if he gets careless, even if just

for a little while. You have to be on top of the game every minute in a cockpit. If you let down for any reason, you're asking for the shaft. It can happen to anybody, any time, any place."

"Is that the voice of experience?"

"Yeah," Sammy said defensively. "Yeah. I've made my share of mistakes and almost cashed out a time or two. I'm big enough to admit it. The first few times in the training command, it was ignorance. I just didn't know enough to realize how thin the ice was. But the scariest mistakes were afterwards, in the fleet, when I knew what to do and still got too engrossed in one task, or was too tired and spaced out to get the big picture."

"What was the worst mistake you ever made?"

Sammy shifted uncomfortably in his chair as he rubbed his jaw. "I guess the closest I ever came to the fiery pit was on a night dive-bombing run on Route One in North Vietnam, south of Vinh. We were looking for movers and couldn't find any. For once no one was shooting. When they don't shoot over the beach you get jumpy, edgy. Then we saw this little light right on the road. It looked like a stopped truck. So I figured what the hey and rolled in with four Rockeye."

"And..."

"I was so intent on the pippin, I didn't keep my wings level. By the time I figured that out, I was steep, which I didn't notice. Then after I pickled, I waited too long for all the Rockeyes to go. Training them off a third of a second apart, it's a lifetime from the instant you pickle until the last one goes. So when I finally looked at the altimeter, I was going through a thousand feet, 20 degrees nose down; and I still had 12 Mark 82s under the wings and 10 thousand pounds of fuel." Sammy fell silent and waggled his feet thoughtfully.

"But you managed to pull out," Jake prompted.

Lundeen sighed. "It was too late to eject. I pulled 9½ Gs, bottomed out at 50 feet on the radalt. Thought I was dead then and there and had killed my bombardier." He examined the soles of his shoes. One of them had a hole in it. "Man, I shook for days after that one."

"What went wrong?"

"A combination of things. I didn't set the radar

altimeter to my pickle altitude to give me a warning. Then I was jumpy waiting for the guns to open up and didn't concentrate on flying a good run."

"So after an experience like that, how come you're always telling people you're the world's greatest attack pilot?"

Sammy's eyebrows rose toward his hairline.

"Because I am! You see, after I about made a spectacular 12 o'clock hit, I decided that accidents could happen to anyone who gets complacent, and I mean anyone. Even me. So I stay in shape, get all the rest I can, and when I get into that cockpit, I work like hell until I get out. I don't take anything for granted."

"The grind can be real tough though," Jake admitted. "Especially when it's your second or third flight of the day."

Lundeen nodded. "Other guys might be better sticks than me, they may occasionally get better hits, and they may even have more talent; but no one works as hard as I do at flying. No one works as hard at mastering his art. So I'm going to be there dropping those bombs until the bad guys get me or my plane comes unglued. But I am not going to kill myself!" He flipped his hand. "That's why I'm the world's greatest. I work harder, every flight, every day."

"That reporter, Rucic? He told me a few days ago that the guys who are going to get ahead in naval aviation are the Mister Peepers, guys with zero aggressiveness who fly like they were driving Air Force One."

"The planes cost too much to let hot dogs crack 'em up," Lundeen grunted. "But I still think you can fly aggressively and not have accidents. The secret is to approach every flight, even the most routine, as if it's your solo check ride in basic. Don't let complacency sneak up on you. 'It' may only come out of the sewers every 28 years, but if 'it' latches onto you, you're going to lose a chunk of hide."

"You should have told Coonts about your dive bomb adventure. Maybe he'd have put it in that book about us."

Sammy levered himself out of his chair and headed for the door. "Yeah, like that little scene on the beach with you and Callie. I wonder who told him about that." He chuckled and darted through the door as Jake groped for a flight boot to throw.

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